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Rossetti and His Circle

by Max Beerbohm

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ROSSETTI
AND HIS CIRCLE

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THE POET'S CORNER
THE SECOND CHILDHOOD OF JOHN BULL
A BOOK OF CARICATURES
FIFTY CARICATURES
A SURVEY

D. G. ROSSETTI, PRECOCIOUSLY MANIFESTING, AMONG THE EXILED PATRIOTS WHO FREQUENTED HIS FATHER'S HOUSE IN CHARLOTTE STREET, THAT QUEER INDIFFERENCE TO POLITICS WHICH MARKED HIM IN HIS PRIME AND HIS DECLINE.

Art Dr.
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ROSSETTI AND HIS CIRCLE

BY

MAX BEERBOHM

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NOTE

Anxious to avoid all occasion of offence, I do hope this book will not be taken as a slight to men of the moment. Throughout the past quarter of a century I have been proclaiming by pencil my great interest in such men; and the only fault I have found in them is that (numerous though they always are) they are not numerous enough to satisfy my interest in mankind. They would suffice me if I were properly keen on metaphysics, Chippendale, the beauties of Nature, the latest discoveries in science, the shortest cut to Utopia, etc. I don't agree that the proper study of mankind is Man. I do but confess that Man is the study that has been most congenial to me—so congenial that the current specimens of him have always whetted my appetite for other ones. Lack of imagination debars me from the pleasure of gazing much at the great Jones who is to leave so deep an impress on the late twentieth century, and the even greater Robinson who is to loom so tremendously, for good or evil, over the thirtieth. It is to the Past that I have ever had recourse from the Present. Years ago there was a book entitled 'The Poet's Corner', in which some of my adventures into the Past were recorded by me. But in that volume there was a slight admixture of the (then) Present. In this latest volume there is nothing of anything that wasn't the Past when I was a child. Hence the apologetic (but not, I hope, abject) tone of these prefatory words.

Perhaps I ought also to beg your pardon for having here confined myself to one little bit of the Past. In 'The Poet's Corner' I ranged back as far as Homer. Here I haven't so much as shown Rossetti before he passed out of baby-clothes into breeches. Perhaps you have never heard of Rossetti. In this case, I must apologise still more profusely. But even you, flushed though you

are with the pride of youth; must have heard of the Victorian Era. Rossetti belonged to that—though he was indeed born nine years before it began, and died of it nineteen years before it was over. For him the eighteen-fifties-and-sixties had no romance at all. For me, I confess, they are very romantic—partly because I wasn't alive in them, and partly because Rossetti was.

Byron, Disraeli, and Rossetti—these seem to me the three most interesting men that England had in the nineteenth century. England had plenty of greater men. Shelley, for example, was a far finer poet than Byron. But he was not in himself interesting: he was just a crystal-clear crank. To be interesting, a man must be complex and elusive. And I rather fancy it must be a great advantage for him to have been born outside his proper time and place. Disraeli, as Grand Vizir to some Sultan, in a bygone age, mightn't have seemed so very remarkable after all. Nor might Rossetti in the Quattrocentro and by the Arno. But in London, in the great days of a deep, smug, thick, rich, drab, industrial complacency, Rossetti shone, for the men and women who knew him, with the ambiguous light of a red torch somewhere in a dense fog. And so he still shines for me.

It does not appear that the men and women who knew him well were many. But the men atoned for their fewness by a great deal of genius, and the women by a great deal of beauty. Rossetti had invented a type of beauty; otherwise perhaps we should not be regarding these ladies as beautiful. And certainly the genius of the younger men would not but for him have expressed itself just as it did. Holman Hunt, Millais, Swinburne, Morris, were among those whose early work bore his stamp. Burne-Jones' work bore it always. Even Whistler's had it for a time. These men, with a sprinkling of remarkable elder and younger persons who at one time and another entered or at any rate impinged on the magic Circle, you will find in the pages of this book. Rather a ribald book? Well, *on se moque de ce qu'on aime*. And besides, there is no lack of antidotes. I refer you to William Rossetti's biography of his brother—a very thorough piece of work, full of well-ordered facts, and very

pleasant in tone. Holman Hunt's autobiography is a finely solid and (between the lines) delightful production. Professor Mackail's book about Morris is a penetrating work of art. Nor could a husband and his friends be portrayed more vividly and prettily than Burne-Jones and his friends were portrayed by his widow. And if, albeit earnest, you are in a great hurry, there is always the Dictionary of National Biography, you know.

I must warn you, before parting, not to regard as perfectly authentic any of the portraits that I here present to you. Rossetti 'to my gaze was ne'er vouchsafed.' Nor did I ever set eyes on Coventry Patmore or Ford Madox Brown or John Ruskin or Robert Browning. Nor did I see any one of the others until he had long passed the age at which he knew Rossetti. Old drawings and paintings, early photographs, and the accounts of eye-witnesses, have not, however, been my only aids. I have had another and surer aid, of the most curious kind imaginable. And some day I will tell you all about it, if you would care to hear.

M. B.

Rapallo, 1922.

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British Stock and Alien Inspiration.

First County Member / Holman Hunt — "Very clever, no doubt——"

Second County Member / John Millais — "Full of wonderful ideas, but——"

First County Member / Second County Member / Holman Hunt / John Millais — "Not to be trusted for one moment."

Rossetti's Courtship. Chatham Place, 1850—1860.

A Momentary Vision that once befell Young Millais.

THE SOLE REMARK LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN MADE BY BENJAMIN JOWETT ABOUT THE MURAL PAINTINGS AT THE OXFORD UNION.

"And what were they going to do with the Grail when they found it, Mr. Rossetti?"

Spring Cottage, Hampstead, 1860.

Coventry Patmore very vehemently preaches to the Rossettis that a tea-pot is not worshipful for its form and colour, but as a sublime symbol of domesticity.

TOPSY AND NED JONES, SETTLED ON THE SETTLE IN RED LION SQUARE.

AN INTRODUCTION.

MISS CORNFORTH: "Oh, very pleased to meet Mr. Ruskin, I'm sure."

Blue China.

Woolner at Farringford, 1857.

Mrs. Tennyson: "You know, Mr. Woolner, I'm one of the most un-meddlesome of women; but—when (I'm only asking), *when* do you begin modelling his halo?"

FORD MADOX BROWN BEING PATRONISED BY
HOLMAN HUNT.

THE SMALL HOURS IN THE 'SIXTIES AT 16, CHEYNE WALK.—ALGERNON READING "ANACTORIA" TO GABRIEL AND WILLIAM.

ROSSETTI, HAVING JUST HAD A FRESH CONSIGNMENT OF "STUNNING" FABRICS FROM THAT NEW SHOP IN REGENT STREET, TRIES HARD TO PREVAIL ON HIS YOUNGER SISTER TO ACCEPT AT ANY RATE ONE OF THESE AND HAVE A DRESS MADE OF IT FROM DESIGNS TO BE FURNISHED BY HIMSELF.

D. G. R. "What *is* the use, Christina, of having a heart like a singing bird and a water-shoot and all the rest of it, if you insist on getting yourself up like a pew-opener?"

C. R. "Well, Gabriel, I don't know—I'm sure you yourself always dress very quietly."

ROSSETTI INSISTENTLY EXHORTED BY GEORGE MEREDITH TO COME FORTH INTO THE GLORIOUS SUN AND WIND FOR A WALK TO HENDON AND BEYOND.

Mr. William Bell Scott wondering what it is those fellows seem to see in Gabriel.

Mr. Browning brings a lady of rank and fashion to see Mr. Rossetti.

ROSSETTI IN HIS WORLDLIER DAYS (*CIRCA* 1866—1868) LEAVING THE ARUNDEL CLUB WITH GEORGE AUGUSTUS SALA.

MR. SALA: "You and I, Rossetti, we like and we understand each other. Bohemians, both of us, to the core, we take the world as we find it. *I* give Mr. Levy what *he* wants, and *you* give Mr. Rae and Mr. Leyland what *they* want, and glad we are to pocket the cash and foregather at the Arundel."

Riverside Scene.

Algernon Swinburne taking his great new friend Gosse to see Gabriel Rossetti.

MR. MORLEY OF BLACKBURN, ON AN AFTERNOON IN THE SPRING OF '69, INTRODUCES MR. JOHN STUART MILL.

"It has recently," he says, "occurred to Mr. Mill that in his lifelong endeavour to catch and keep the ear of the nation he has been hampered by a certain deficiency in—well, in warmth, in colour, in rich charm. I have told him that this deficiency (I do not regard it as a defect) might possibly be remedied by *you*. Mr. Mill has in the press at this moment a new work, entitled 'The Subjection of Women.' From my slight acquaintance with you, and from all that I have seen and heard of your work, I gather that women greatly interest you, and I have no doubt that you are incensed at their subjection. Mr. Mill has brought his proof-sheets with him. He will read them to you. I believe, and he takes my word for it, that a series of illustrative paintings by you would" etc., etc.

A Man from Hymettus.

Mr. Frederic Leighton: "Think not for one moment, my dear Mr. Rossetti, that I am insensible to the charm of a life recluded, as yours is, from the dust of the arena, from the mire of the market-place. Ah no!—I envy you your ivory tower. How often at some Council Meeting of the R.A. have I murmured within me that phrase of Wordsworth's, 'The world is too much with us'! But alas, in all of us there is a duality of nature. You, *O felix nimium*, are poet as well as painter. I, separated from my easel, am but a citizen. And the civistic passion—yes, passion, dear Mr. Rossetti—restrains the instinct of the artist in me towards solitude, and curbs the panting of the hart in me for the water-brooks. I feel that I have, in conjunction with my colleagues, a duty to the nation. To improve the taste of the Sovereign, the taste of her ever-genial first-born and of his sweet and gracious consort, of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal of the faithful Commons, of the Judicial Bench, of those who direct the Army and Navy and Reserve Forces, of our merchant princes in Threadneedle Street and of our squires in the Shires, and through all these to bring light and improvement to those toiling millions on whom ultimately the glory of Great Britain rests—all this is in me an ambition not to be stifled and an aspiration not to be foregone. You smile, Mr. Rossetti, yet I am not disemboldened to say to you now, as I have often wished to say to you, in the words of the Apostle Paul, 'Come over and help us!' Our President—I grant you in confidence—is not of all men the most enlightened. But I, in virtue of what is left to me of youth and ardour, conjoined with the paltry gift of tact, have some little influence at Burlington House. Come now!—let me put your name down in our Candidates' Book."

A Dream after Reading

Quis Custodiet Ipsum Custodem?

THEODORE WATTS: "Mr. Caine, a word with you! Shields and I have been talking matters over, and we are agreed that to-night and henceforth you *must* not and *shall* not read any more of your literary efforts to our friend. They are too—what shall I say?—too luridly arresting, and are the allies of insomnia."

MR. —— AND MISS —— NERVOUSLY PERPETUATING THE TOUCH OF A VANISHED HAND.

THE NAME OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI IS HEARD FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. TIME: 1881. LECTURER: MR. OSCAR WILDE.

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Rossetti and his circle